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By Donna Seaman

A hospital waiting room is one of the last places you want to be, even in a short story. And what sort of company will Milly Diamond provide? Blind in one eye and with "an artificial hip that made her 'oof' out loud and sway with each step," she is anxious about her husband, Charlie, who is undergoing open-heart surgery at 74. But Milly proves to be sharp, pragmatic and funny. When the rabbi stops by and reels off a list of people she knows who are also waiting, Milly asks him to spread the word and tell her friends to join her for a few hands of poker. Why not gamble with something as insignificant as money when life is on the table in the "casino of health"?

In "The Family Diamond," over the course of nine short stories loosely linked through the Diamond family line, Edward Schwarzschild squarely faces obdurate aspects of life - illness, aging and death - with curiosity, respect and humor. He is the sort of fiction writer whose prose is so lucid, psychology so convincing, characters and action so surprising and intriguing, you forget you're reading. But for all their beguilement, these are unsparing tales of yearning and regret. Marriage is a primary theme, beginning with the long union of Milly and Charlie. As loyal and loving as they are to each other, hard knocks and age have so battered and bruised them Charlie worries he won't be able to give his grandson, whose marriage proposal to the woman he lives with was rejected, much advice about his broken heart because he and Milly "have become too accustomed to loss."

Other marriages are abruptly jettisoned. In "Drift," a gorgeous and unsettling story of disconnection and disaffection, Liz spontaneously quits her telemarketing job the same day her precocious, often disobedient 9-year-old son gets into real trouble at school. This time not only has he "tossed two extremely chalky erasers at a classmate," he has answered the teacher's question as to "what on earth he was doing" by quoting John Lee Hooker, "Let this boy boogie-woogie, cause it's in him, and it's got to come out."

The violation of safety zones virtual and literal is a more covert but even more powerful motif. In "No Rest for the Middleman," a noirish tale that echoes Schwarzschild's first book, the highly regarded novel "Responsible Men," Jewish gangsters apply pressure even on the High Holidays, cornering a victim in a temple men's room and using hot water as a weapon. Water provides refuge in "Distance Man." Bespectacled and galumphing misfit Alex catches the eye of a swimming coach who has unerring radar for oddballs who will benefit from the rigor of swimming laps. The discipline works for Alex, but he harbors pain and resentment well into adulthood and very nearly defiles the watery realm he loves in a terrifying moment when he almost is overcome by "jealousy or anger or self-pity."

Schwarzschild writes about women with empathy and admiration. He also has a rare gift for combining sweetness and menace, and he is a master at depicting impulsiveness and the chaos it ignites. In "Reunion," a tricky and unnerving story, Scott, who married a

woman whose first husband dropped dead while she was pregnant, cannot understand his feckless sister, Kim. Their glamorous, once-flirtatious mother is dying, and Kim is about to crash and burn her third marriage. In "What to Expect," Claude, who raised his son, Larry, alone after his wife died, can't let go, and the weird, threatening tension among Claude, Larry and Larry's pregnant wife nearly reaches critical mass. Abrupt failures of the body, the sudden cessation of love, the early death of a spouse, the confusions of parenting, the dropping of a mask, the inability to keep on keeping on - - all fascinate Schwarzschild. Accordingly, these are compelling and affecting stories, extraordinary in their transparency, authenticity and empathy as Schwarzschild writes with equal conviction about the friction between young siblings and the faintly ludicrous, possibly mysterious atmosphere of a retirement community.

Schwarzschild's collection will have the sharpest impact on readers dealing with age, either their own or their parents'. But what Schwarzschild does most daringly is to reveal that tenderness, a trivialized emotion, is, in fact, a radical, life-altering force.

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